

War was return of earth to ugly earth.  
 War was foundering of sublimities.  
 Extinction of each happy art and faith  
 By which the world had still kept head in air.  
 Protesting logic or protesting love.  
 Until the unendurable moment struck –  
 The inward scream, the duty to run mad.

Robert Graves

In many acts and quiet observances  
 You absorbed me:  
 Until one day I stood eminent  
 And I saw you gathered round me,  
 L'plooking.  
 And about you a radiance that seemed to beat  
 With variant glow and to give  
 Grace to our unity.

But, God! I know that I'll stand  
 Someday in the loneliest wilderness.  
 Someday my heart will cry  
 For the soul that has been, but that now  
 Is scatter'd with the winds,  
 Deceased and devoid.

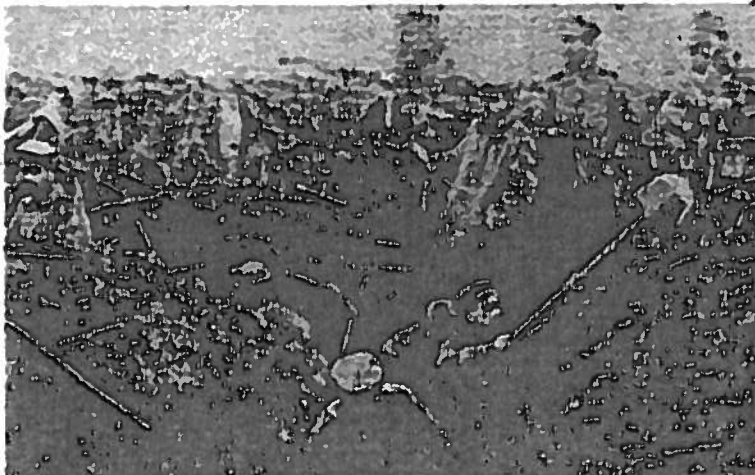
I know that I'll wander with a cry;  
 'O beautiful men, O men I loved,  
 O whether are you gone, my company?'

Herbert Read

*No pen or drawing can convey this country – the normal setting of the battles taking place day and night, month after month. Evil and the incarnate fiend alone can be master of this war, and no glimmer of God's hand is seen anywhere. Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all through the bitter black of night is fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes evilly yellow, the shell-holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze and sweat and the shells never cease. They alone plunge overhead, tearing away the rotting tree stumps...annihilating maiming, maddening, they plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast upon it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless.*

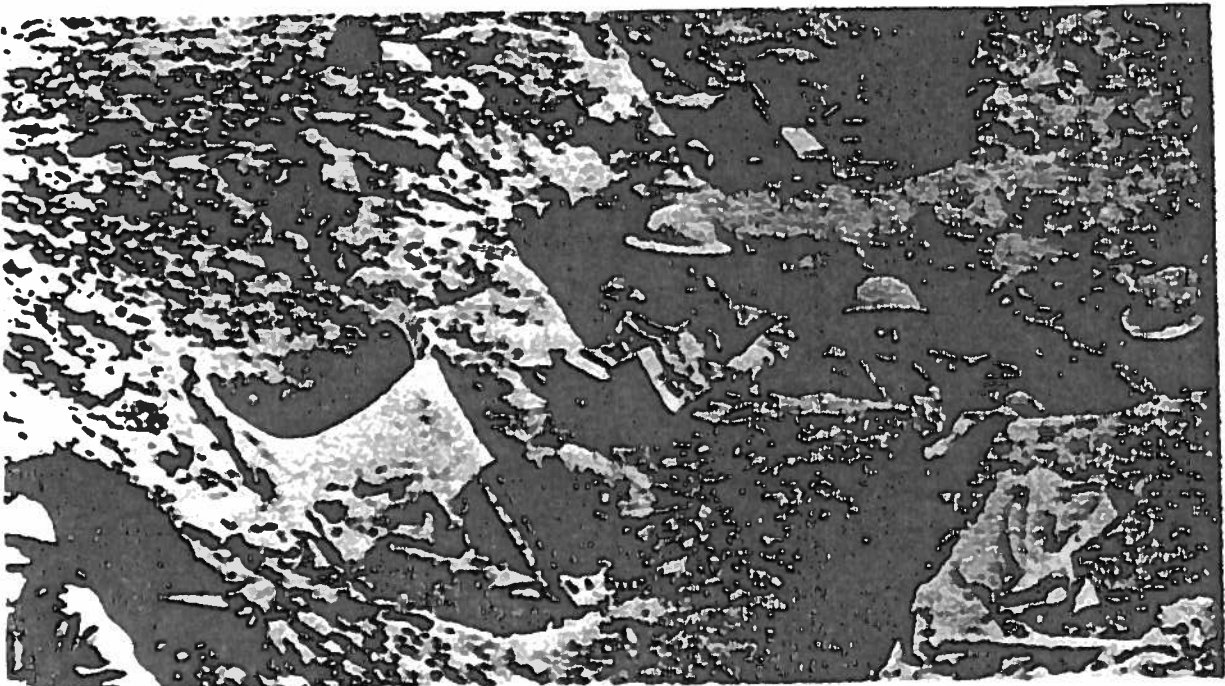
Paul Nash

From the very beginning of the war troops on all sides had been forced at times to dig in to obtain some kind of cover against enemy firepower. But the first earthworks they threw up were purely temporary, shallow depressions similar to the slit-trenches and fox-holes of the Second World War. *They*



A German officer supervises his men digging a trench in the Argonne, 1915.

A foretaste of the trenches:  
German infantry dig rifle  
pits, 1914.



were only to give some minimal protection, for twenty-four hours at the most, prior to moving forwards. But after the Battle of the Marne, when the retreating Germans reached the Aisne, General von Falkenhayn decided that his troops must at all costs hold on to those parts of France and Belgium that they still occupied. The Germans he felt, could afford to sit tight and hold off any attacks that the Allies, particularly the French, would be obliged to launch. They were the ones who had to liberate their country from the invader; therefore let them break themselves upon a well-fortified German defensive line. So the Germans dug in, intending to remain just where they were. The Allies soon found that they were incapable of breaking through this line and they too began to create a permanent line of earthworks. It was never conceived of as more than a jumping-off point for an ultimately decisive breakthrough, but even the most obtuse Allied commander realised that their forces might have to remain where they were for quite a few months.

The beginning of trench warfare proper is usually given as September 1914, when the German VII Reserve Corps turned around on the Chemin des Dames Ridge and blocked the advance of the British I Corps. Within a few weeks the stalemate that occurred there had spread down the whole battle-line. This line spread from the North Sea to the Swiss Frontier. Obviously, on such a long line, 475 miles in all, the nature of the terrain varied considerably, and this in turn had its effect upon the type of trenches and fortifications that were built. The northern part of the front, in Belgium and in France as far south as the Somme, was held by the British. Here was to be found some of the worst terrain of all and conditions in the British trenches were often nightmarish.

The line began at Nieuport on the coast and then ran along the flooded Yser to Dixmude. From there it ran around the notorious Ypres Salient and across the French frontier north-west of Armentières. This Flanders countryside was very flat and rarely more than a metre or two above sea level. The nearest English equivalent would be the fenlands of Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. In such conditions the most trivial little bump in the ground, never more than sixty metres above sea level, became an important strategic point. Unfortunately most of them were held by the Germans. Having been the first to decide to stand fast and dig they had always been able to choose the most advantageous spots. Two of the most important were Hill 60, two miles south-west of Ypres, and the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge, a little to the south.

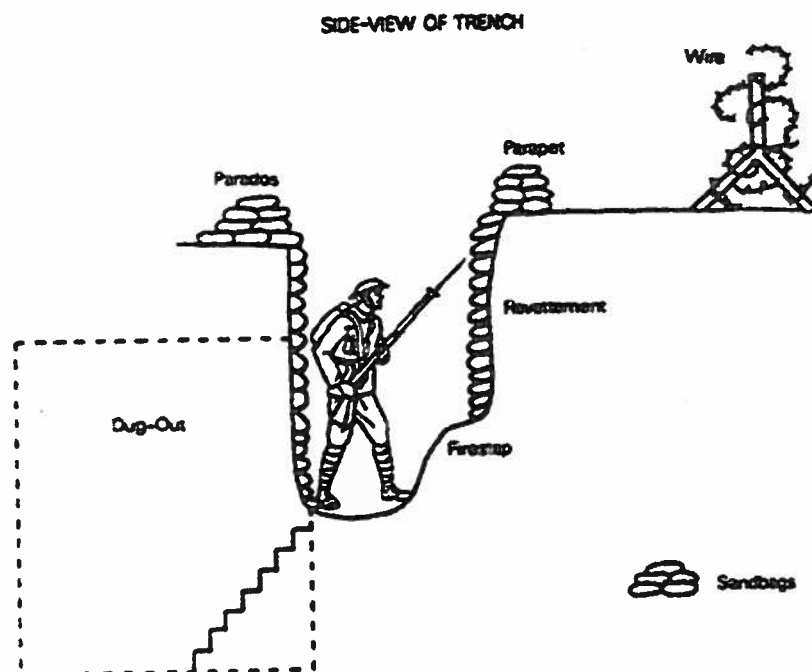
Not only did possession of the higher ground give the Germans a tactical advantage, but it also forced the British to live in the foulest conditions. As soon as they began to dig down they would invariably find water two or three feet below

the surface. Along the whole line, from the coast to La Bassée, trench life involved a never-ending struggle against water and mud. Around Nieuport the terrain was little more than one big flood, the tide only being controlled by a complex series of locks, dams and canals. Trenches proper were quite out of the question and the British front was a series of sandbag breastworks and fortified islands. The Germans did their best to make life even more intolerable by continually shelling the locks and trying to flood out the defenders. In the rest of Flanders the British were soon forced to give up the unequal struggle against the mud and the constantly collapsing trenches. From January 1915 they took to constructing what were called parapet or command trenches. The Germans referred to them as box trenches. In these one only dug down, if at all, to a maximum of one or two feet and the rest of the trench was built up with thick walls of sandbags. These latter were rarely filled with sand; earth or, best of all, clay was generally used. Such trenches were usually between seven and eight feet deep and six to seven feet wide. The walls of sandbags themselves were made as thick as possible to absorb any bullets or shell fragments. Often they measured as much as ten feet at the top and twenty feet at the base. In certain parts of the line the ground was too swampy to permit even the creation of secure command trenches. In the La Bassée sector, which lay below sea level, a system of ferro-concrete emplacements had to be built. The 42nd East Lancashire Division on one Brigade front of about 2,000 yards used 5,036 bags of cement, 19,384 bags of shingle and 9,692 bags of sand in creating a single reserve trench line. Even excluding the necessary water, this involves over 900 tons of materials, most of which had to be manhandled by those members of the Division not actually in the fire trenches.

There was one other sector of the line in which command trenches were standard practice. This was in the Argonne, held by the French, where again it was found that the water level was much too near the surface. In all other areas the troops simply dug themselves a deep hole in the ground. But whether trenches were dug or built, they were all - French, German or British - designed according to the same basic pattern. In the fenland of Flanders, the slagheaps of industrial Artois, the chalky downlands of Picardy, the marshy lowlands of the Somme Valley, along the line of the Aisne, through Champagne, the Argonne, Lorraine and across the mountainous Vosges, each side created for themselves fairly uniform defence systems, and learnt a vocabulary that owed more to Vauban than to the theories of contemporary military science.

The front of the trench was known as the parapet, generally about ten feet high. Even in trenches which were dug down, the top two or three feet of the parapet would consist of a thick

line of sandbags. Obviously, in a trench of this depth it would be impossible to see or fire over the top, so there was built at the bottom a two or three-foot high ledge known as the fire-step. This was used by those on sentry duty, or by the whole unit when 'standing to' to face a possible enemy attack. The back wall of the trench was known as the parados, and it too was often built up with sandbags. Except in a particularly favourable terrain, notably chalk, it was not possible to expect the sides of a trench to stand up of their own accord. Rainfall, natural pressures and shell-fire would inevitably cause extensive subsidences. To minimise the chance of such disasters it was usual torevet the parapet and parados. The British and Germans generally used sandbags and timber, whilst the French were more inclined to use hurdles, bunches



of twigs and branches cut from surrounding trees. Stone was rarely used, partly because of the effort involved in transporting it, but also because it was unwise to build a revetment too solidly. The French had tried using stone in trenches near Compiègne and it was found that, whilst the parapet did not collapse, the weight of the trapped rainwater simply pushed the sides of the trenches closer and closer together.

(Of course trenches were not simply long, straight lines. This would have presented terrible dangers should the enemy ever have broken into the trench line. Then they could have simply set up a machine gun and fired right down the trench (i.e. enfiladed fire). Thus the trench was broken up into small sections, each screened from the other by a barrier of earth and sandbags jutting out into the trench. The straight sections, perhaps ten yards long, were known as firebays, where the infantryman usually stood when on duty or alert, whilst the 'kinks' in the line were known as traverses. Seen from the air a trench line had the crenellated appearance of the battlements on a castle. The Germans adopted an identical system, though the French were inclined to do without the laborious chain or bays and traverses, preferring instead a simple zig-zag line.

An almost too perfect example of a sand-bagged trench showing the traverses and firebays.

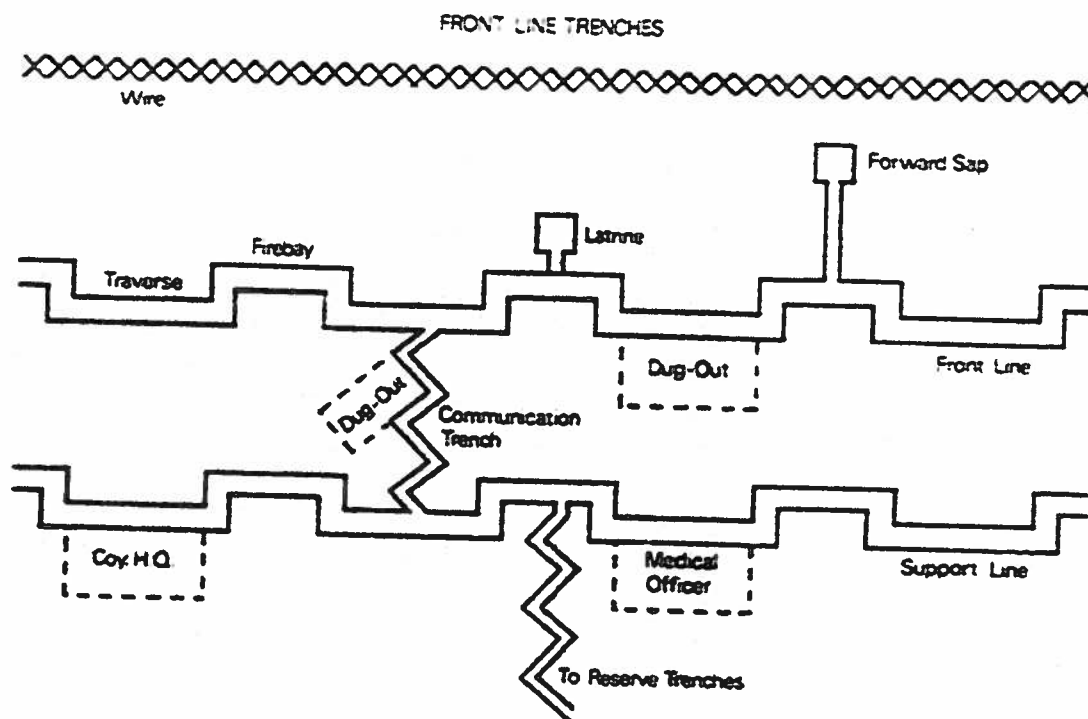




The armies remained in these holes for the next four years. millions of men trapped in a desolate strip of territory, living and dying in a wilderness of trenches, dugouts, craters, shattered villages and forests of lifeless tree-stumps, a desert in the midst of civilisation, that became more featureless with each passing day. This book is concerned with the way men lived in this physical and spiritual desert. It will show how even in the midst of previously inconceivable conditions, men were able to formulate routines, rules and codes of conduct that could create some kind of order, some kind of meaning in the midst of Chaos itself. For all were agreed that they lived on the very threshold of Hell.

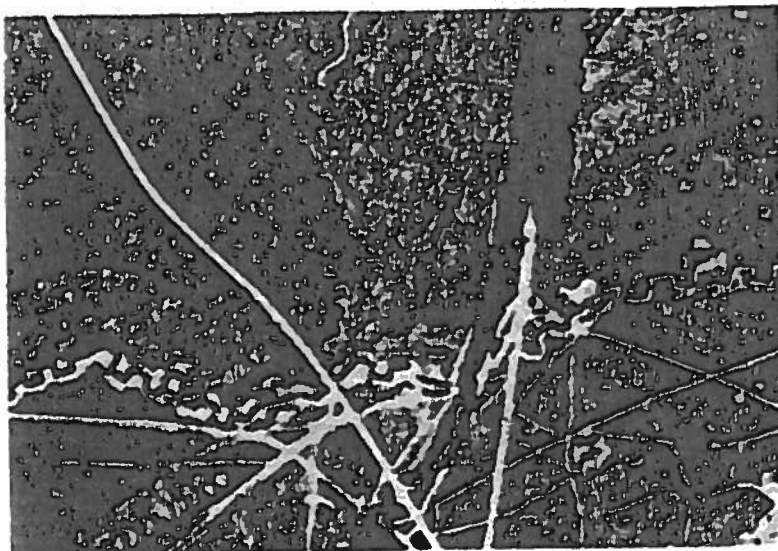
A French infantry lieutenant, Alfred Joubaire, wrote in his diary shortly before he was killed: 'Humanity is mad! It must be mad to do what it is doing. What a massacre! What scenes of horror and carnage! I cannot find words to translate my impressions. Hell cannot be so terrible. Men are mad!' Yet most men lived through the experience and remained more or less sane. Perhaps by examining the nature of that experience, at its most mundane, day-to-day level, it may be possible to discover just how the troops in the trenches managed to discern a necessary and logical reality that enabled them to survive and fight on.





The front-line trench was not, in fact, the most forward defensive position. Running out at right-angles to most trenches were what were known as saps, narrow passages some twenty or thirty yards long leading to an isolated little position for two or three men. These were the listening posts where for a couple of hours at a time the sentries would squat, peering into the darkness and straining to hear the slightest sound from the enemy lines. A French soldier spoke of 'the little listening posts of terrible memory. It is difficult to imagine the suffering of the sentries. . . How often did the absolute solitude provoke panic at the slightest movement of an animal in the grass, at the stirring of a branch in the moonlight?' These listening posts were often in shell craters. In 1916 and 1917, particularly, a shell falling in no man's land would precipitate a series of minor but bloody attacks and counter-attacks as each side tried to seize the new crater and connect it to their own lines with a new sap. For some time it was a General Order that any British unit had to occupy any shell crater created within sixty yards of their line. These were

An aerial view of the  
Hindenburg line as seen from  
2,000 feet.



often consolidated as 'cruciform' posts, formed of two trenches intersecting at right angles.

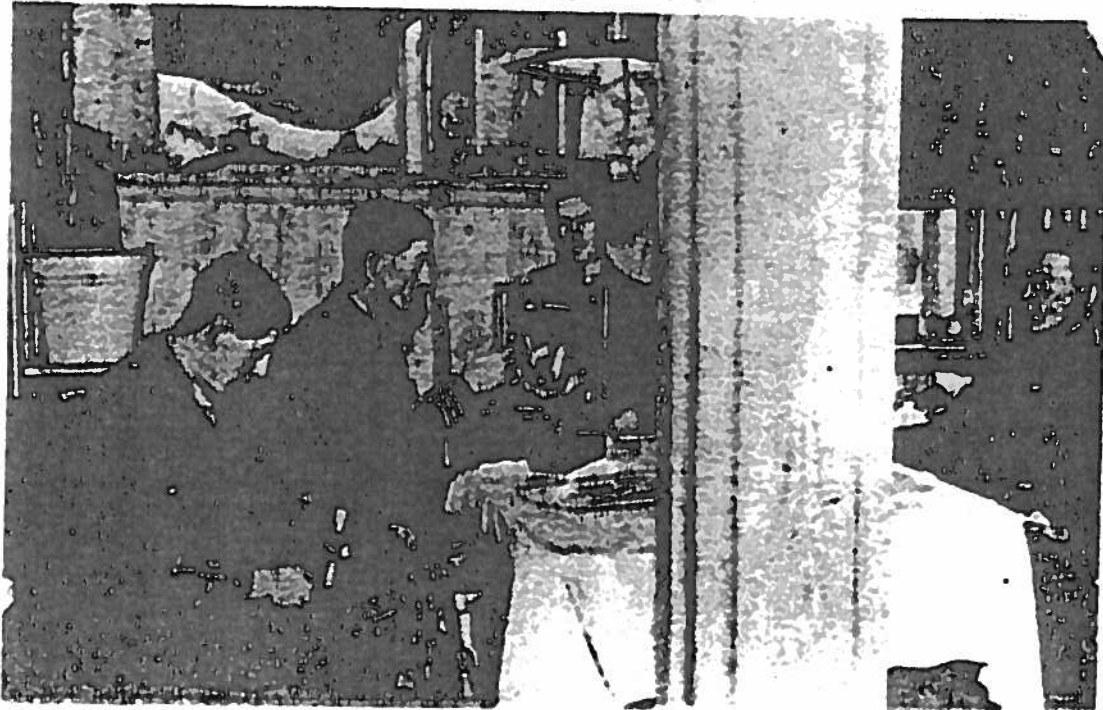
Trenches also had outlets from the back. For they were usually built in triple lines: the fire trench, the support trench and the reserve trench or dugouts. In the more complicated German systems there might be as many as ten lines of trenches. To allow soldiers to move to the front or rear in comparatively safety communication trenches were built between the various lines. They were usually the same depth and width as ordinary fire trenches but did not have traverses and firebays. But these too were never constructed in a straight line, and went out in a zig-zag. On the British front by 1917 some of these communication trenches were as much as three miles long.

Another indispensable feature of any piece of trench was the dugout, a shelter or burrow to give some sort of protection against the elements and enemy artillery. Officers could almost always expect to find a corner in some kind of dugout, but the ordinary soldiers, in many cases, had to make do with even cruder refuges. Sometimes they simply spread pieces of wood, corrugated iron or tarpaulin across the trench from parapet to parapet. In other cases they would scoop out a hollow in the front or back of the trench. Here, wrapped in their groundsheet, they would snatch their brief periods of sleep, curled up parallel to the trench or with their feet sticking out into it. This system of personal 'funk-holes' was particularly common among the French. In the German and English lines, in theory at least, it was banned because of the increased danger of the trench walls subsiding. Nevertheless, any unit marching along a trench at night would provoke a monotonous series of muffled oaths as they stumbled over the legs of sleeping soldiers.

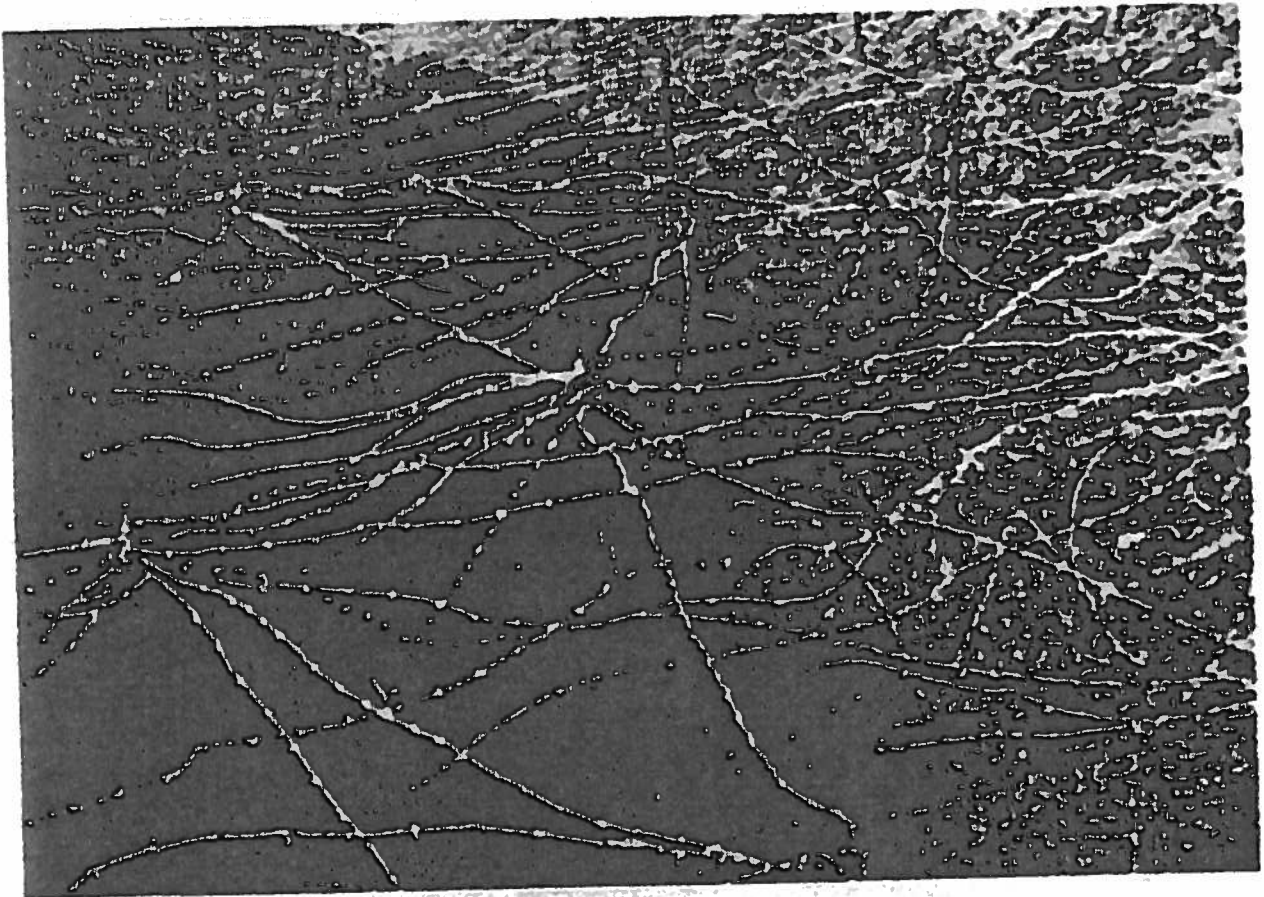


It is generally agreed that the Germans were much better off than the Allies with respect to their dugouts. In the front line there was little difference. One German officer has described the forward trenches in Champagne where the available shelter was nothing more than recesses dug in the chalk walls and covered with boards and a few shovelfuls of soil. Their inherent dampness caused the infantrymen to refer to them as 'drip wells' or 'men's baths'. But further back the accommodation was, under the circumstances, almost lavish. Such was the case in the Somme Valley in 1916. Here the dugouts were thirty or forty feet deep, connected by tunnels and steel railway systems. Electric light and ventilation was provided in all rooms, and many of them had panelled walls and planked floors. An English chaplain who visited some captured German trenches during the Battle of the Somme described the extreme lengths to which the Germans went to make these dugouts habitable. The walls were boarded with neatly morticed timbers, telephone wires were laid along the walls, iron girders were boxed in, ceilings were painted white, woodwork varnished, and in the officers' quarters one even found wooden beading, carpets on the floors and glass windows. The Reverend was probably mistaken about the windows. Another eye-witness pointed out that the German dugouts captured near Le Sars contained 'port holes' of mirrored glass to give the illusion of being able to look out.

British officers in a captured German dugout. Note the wall paper and wooden paneling.

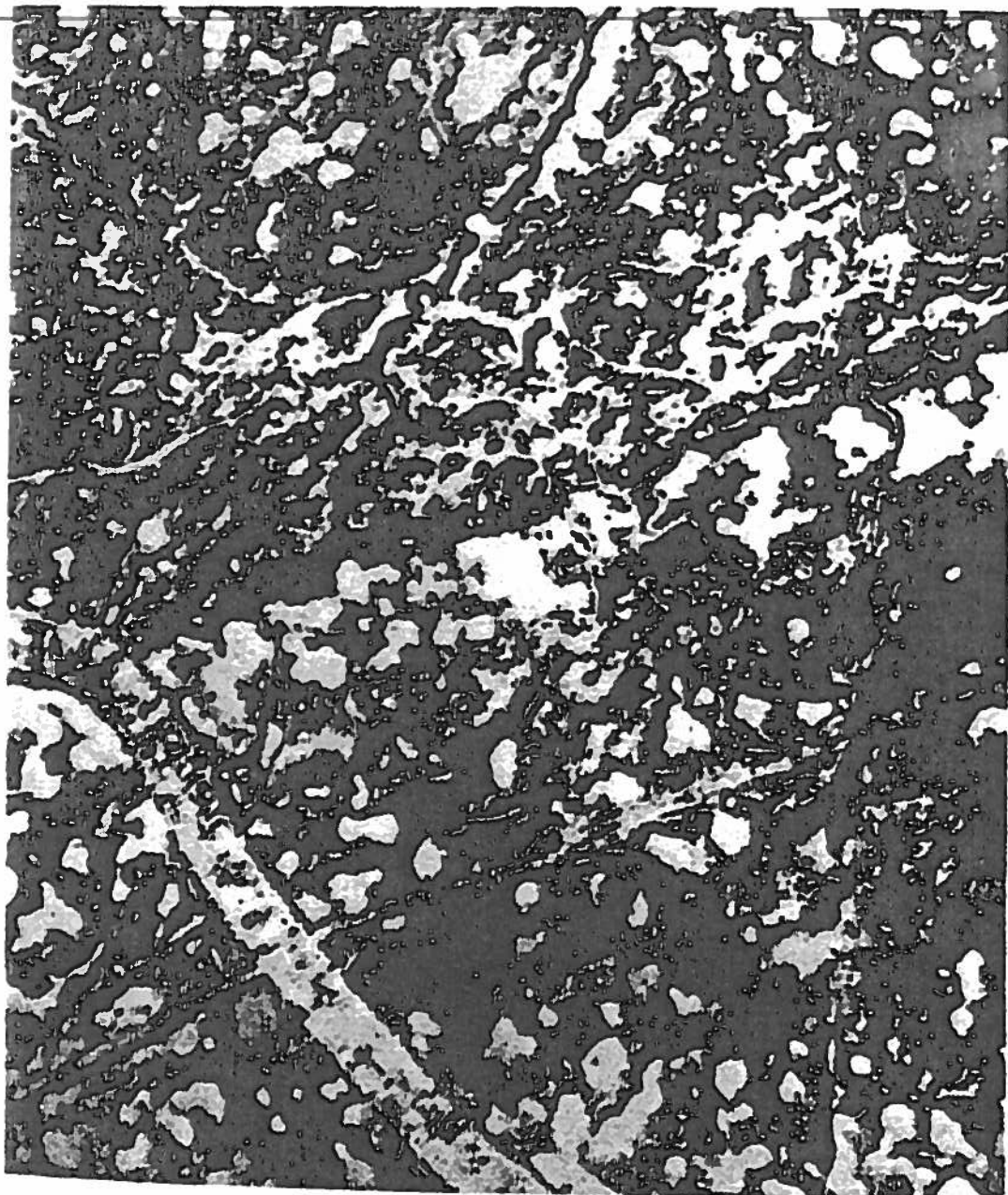


Wire, of course, was a ubiquitous feature of no man's land. One of the most common fatigues for the men in the trenches was the wiring party. Almost every night a little group would have to crawl over their own parapets and repair an old entanglement or add even more. At first the wire was supported with stakes knocked in with padded mallets, but



later someone came up with the idea of giving the stakes a corkscrew tip so that they could be noiselessly inserted into the ground. For obvious reasons the wire was always placed at least a grenade's throw from one's own trench. The amount used varied a great deal, depending largely on the zeal and industriousness of the unit in the line. The Germans were particularly keen in this respect. Their wire was hardly ever less than fifty feet deep, and in many places it was a hundred feet more. In the Siegfried Line every trench had at least ten belts of wire in front of it. The French, too, relied heavily on this kind of obstruction. In the Fourth Army trenches near Rheims in April 1916 it was an Army Order that each unit had to add at least two yards to the thickness of the wire every week.

Barbed wire entanglements.



But what of that narrow strip that divided two opposing trench lines – 'no man's land'? The very negativeness of the concept is testimony to the tactical and strategic bankruptcy that was revealed on the Western Front, whilst it also hints at the utter desolation, at the uselessness of this pulverised, barren vacuum. The width of no man's land varied a great deal from sector to sector. It was usually between ten and five hundred yards, the average distance between the trenches being two to three hundred yards. In Flanders, the average was a little less, probably about 150 yards. But, it is very difficult to generalise. Around Cambrai, one of the easiest British sectors, there was a dead zone of 500 yards; whilst at Les Boeufs, near Guillemont, it was only fifty yards. Sometimes the two sides were almost nose to nose. Near Zonnebeke in 1915 the British and Germans were only seven or eight yards apart, and in certain trenches in La Boisselle it has been claimed that the opposing sentries could have crossed their bayonets. In the Ypres Salient, the worst part of the British lines, the trenches were always very close. At one point the Canadians found themselves at one end of a ruined barn and the Germans at the other. On the Bellewaarde Ridge, in 1915, the British and the Germans actually shared the same front-line trench. All that divided them was a thick barrier of sandbags and barbed wire.

## 14 A CENTURY OF WAR

RIGHT: A British trench in France, with weary soldiers grabbing some sleep, while a comrade keeps watch armed with his 0.303 inch Short Magazine Lee-Enfield rifle. The revetments and bridge indicate a sense of permanence.



Below: American troops operating Renault tanks in the Argonne region in France in September 1918, less than two months before the war's end.

### First World War 1914-1918

#### Background

With hindsight, the First World War seems to have been inevitable. The preceding decade was characterised by armament races between

the great powers (on land between Germany and France, and at sea between Germany and Great Britain), the weakness of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Russia's Balkan policy, coupled, in virtually all European states, with jingoistic nationalism. There had also been a series of small wars: between Italy and Turkey in 1912, and two Balkan Wars, the first from October 1912 to May 1913 and the second from June to August 1913.

In such a high pressure situation it needed only a small spark to ignite the explosion, which came with the assassination of the Arch-Duke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo. In all countries involved, the generals and admirals insisted that the order be given to start the massive mobilisation and deployment processes, while popular jingoism also pushed the statesmen into ever more entrenched positions. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28

